Making Sense of Public Opinion

American Discourses About Immigration and Social Programs

Questions about immigration and social welfare programs raise the central issues of who belongs to a society and what its members deserve. Yet the opinions of the American public about these important issues seem contradictory and confused. Claudia Strauss explains why: public opinion on these issues and many others is formed not from liberal or conservative ideologies but from diverse vernacular discourses that may not fit standard ideologies but are easy to remember and repeat.

Drawing on interviews with people from various backgrounds, Strauss identifies and describes fifty-nine conventional discourses about immigration and social welfare and demonstrates how we acquire conventional discourses from our opinion communities. *Making Sense of Public Opinion: American Discourses About Immigration and Social Programs* explains what conventional discourses are, how to study them, and why they are fundamental elements of public opinion and political culture.

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Making Sense of Public Opinion

American Discourses About Immigration and Social Programs

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Including "Mexican American Discourses and the Theory of Divergence" by Hannah Pick

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To Jim

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?	rising inflection
…	long pause (approximately one second or longer)
[…]	deletion
[word]	uncertain transcription
[ ]	unintelligible
[*italicized words*]	added for clarification
Italic	speaker's emphatic stress
Boldface	highlighted by author

Names of interviewees and names of relatives and friends referred to in their comments are pseudonyms.

Stutters and verbal fillers such as *um* and *uhh* were deleted for readability, unless they are significant for the interpretation.

Preface

Why does public opinion so often seem inconsistent? When people are given the chance to express their views at length, they may mix different points of view in surprising combinations. In this study I asked questions about immigration and government social welfare programs. As I listened to a land developer, a laborer, a salesperson, a professor, a child-care worker, a customer service representative, an engineer, a millworker, a dental assistant, a factory middle manager, a small businessman, and many others, I began to notice some interesting patterns that revealed something important about political culture and how people form their opinions.

First, even though most of my participants did not know each other, sometimes they sounded exactly alike. They would make many of the same points, often using nearly the same words.

Second, each person had a large repertoire of these ready-made points, and the points often crossed ideological lines. The same person would jump from a point that sounded conservative to one that sounded liberal to one that could not be classified as either liberal or conservative.

Finally, these ready-made points cover a wide range of views that add considerable complexity to standard descriptions of American political culture (for example, as "individualist").

I call each of these ready-made points a *conventional discourse*. Some examples, using the shorthand names I have devised, are Help Our Own First, Illegal Is Wrong, Jobs Americans Don't Want, Nation of Immigrants, and Employers Taking Advantage discourses about immigration and Government Inefficiency, Personal Responsibility, Work Should Be Rewarded, and Greed of Corporations and the Rich discourses about

government social programs. This book is about conventional discourses like these: what they are, how researchers can study them, and their implications for understanding the complexity of American political culture and how people acquire that culture and make it personally meaningful, using it to form their opinions. The more I analyzed conventional discourses, the more I realized their significance.

Conventional discourses are key components of people's opinion statements. Sometimes a speaker's comments will be nothing more than an assemblage of conventional discourses. In other cases, speakers add their own examples and elaborations, but these are the personal furnishings in a structure formed by conventional discourses. It is highly unusual for speakers to eschew such discourses completely. The formulaic content of discourses indicates that they are shared; people must be getting them from others they talk to or media figures they hear.

For opinion researchers, becoming aware of conventional discourse sheds light on why people often seem to contradict themselves when talking about social issues or responding to opinion surveys. Part of the explanation lies with the heterogeneous discourses that people acquire from different sources. For some topics another part of the explanation is a mismatch between the discourses of the researchers and those of the people they are studying. Opinions that make no sense if we assume that people have views organized by standard political ideologies can be explained if we are familiar with the vernacular conventional discourses evoked by the wording of a question in an interview or survey.

For those interested in cultural meanings, studying conventional discourses focuses attention on vernacular ways of framing issues in all of their variety and complexity. It contributes to new lines of research about the formation of political subjectivities and publics that recognize themselves as political agents.

For qualitative and quantitative social researchers, conventional-discourse analysis is a very useful method. I have found that it is easy to understand – my students pick it up quickly. The method can be applied to any verbal expression of opinion from any source, whether from Web sites, published speeches, interviews, focus groups, or overheard remarks. Survey researchers will obtain misleading results if they fail to take vernacular conventional discourses into account in formulating and analyzing their questions.

My initial aim in this book is to explain what I mean by conventional discourses, how conventional discourses in my sense are similar to but not exactly the same as related constructs (e.g., "discourses" as others use

the term), and how one goes about conducting a conventional-discourse analysis. This will equip the reader to conduct similar analyses of opinion statements from any source on any topic.

Another aim is to use case studies of some of my interviewees to consider why they answered my questions in the ways they did. What discourses did my questions evoke? If they use multiple, seemingly opposing, discourses, do they have meaningful ways of combining them, or are their views a random mishmash of unrelated discourses? Do they interpret the same discourse in different ways? Studying how people use standard discourses, and the relation between the discourses individuals use and those used by others in their community, gives us insight into the perennial question of whether people actively construct their own identities and understandings or are passively molded by forces beyond their control. This information can also be used to interpret otherwise puzzling survey findings, and it suggests answers to the problem of democratic competence, that is, whether ordinary people can be trusted with democracy.

Finally, this work provides a field guide to some of the contemporary vernacular discourses circulating in the United States about the key issues of immigration and government social programs. These descriptions will interest anyone concerned with the multiple framings of those issues in the United States. I picked immigration and social welfare programs because I care about them and so do the people with whom I spoke. They go to the heart of concepts of citizenship and the nature of a good society: Who belongs? What are the responsibilities of people to their society and of a society to its people?

There are many other ways in which a conventional-discourse analysis can be used, beyond what I have the space to do in this book. Here are examples:

- Examine which conventional discourses are shared and which differ from one group to another. Compare discourses used by people who vote differently or people from different ethnic groups, generational cohorts, class backgrounds, regions, or countries.
- Investigate the ways conventional discourses cluster. Is discourse *x* more likely to be found with discourse *y* or discourse *z*?
- Explore in what settings a particular discourse is most likely to be voiced. Which ones are used in mass media, which only in private settings?
- Analyze opinion survey questions to see how their wording jibes with that of current conventional discourses. For example, does a survey

obtain reactions to only a small set of current discourses? Does a survey question inadvertently mix wording from different discourses, producing a muddled result?

- Take a longitudinal sample of published texts of a certain type (e.g., presidential inaugural addresses) to see whether the discourses in them change over time. Which discourses are long-standing; which are newer? Why do discourses gain or lose prominence?
- Observe the relation between the conventional discourses in the media at one time, and among the general public at a later time, or the reverse, to study how discourses flow between the media and the public.
- Look at the discourses used to mobilize support for political action: When is it effective to use common conventional discourses; when is it strategically better to introduce less familiar discourses?

A conventional-discourse analysis is not limited to opinions collected through interviews. Semistructured interviews were my primary source, however. The method of semistructured interviews in local communities gives voice to people who are not often heard in analyses of political culture. It allows the researcher to see how interviewees frame issues in their own words, how they interpret shared discourses, how their discourses are related to their life stories, and how they mentally connect or separate discourses as they free-associate with minimal interruptions. Thus, it was the ideal method for my primary research question about the way people internalize political culture.

Of course every research method has drawbacks that have to be weighed against its advantages. One disadvantage of interviewing is that when people are talking to an interviewer whom they do not know, they may censor some of the discourses that they would use with close associates and that might have been observed through long-term fieldwork. The vernacular discourses described here, therefore, may be incomplete, perhaps missing the most virulent anti-immigrant discourses or ones that ethnic minorities might use with in-group members but not with a white interviewer like me.

On the other hand, social norms for speaking give interviews compensating advantages. Communities develop practices connecting discourses to social settings. The discourses one uses in a bar are different from the ones used in church. In order to keep talking for an inquisitive interviewer, however, people may throw out a wide variety of discourses they would normally reserve for separate settings. In some of the public settings one might observe through participant-observation fieldwork, people will be afraid to voice the views they believe to have low cultural

standing (a term I will explain more in Chapter 1), although they would be less afraid to voice them to an interviewer who was not in their social circle. For my study another advantage of interviews is that it is hard to predict when and where the topics of social welfare policies and immigration will come up in people's everyday conversations. Activist groups can be counted on to discuss these topics, but activists are atypical. I wanted to hear from folks whom I did not already know to be committed to one side or the other of the issues of this research.

For a study of conventional discourses it is also important to remember that what interviewees truly believe is not important. What matters is what is easily and commonly said, because this is what shapes the tenor of public discussion.

One concern about in-depth interview studies is that the number of participants tends to be small. Interviews are time consuming and produce hundreds of pages of transcripts. It is difficult to do justice to this rich material with a large sample.[1] Previous interview studies with small numbers of participants have been the source of important findings because they were able to probe deeply into the structure of each person's beliefs. Some examples of research with a scope and topics similar to mine include Robert Lane's examination of the political worldviews of fifteen working-class men in Connecticut; Jennifer Hochschild's analysis of twenty-eight upper- and lower-income men's and women's opinions regarding the distribution of wealth, also in Connecticut; and Craig Reinarman's investigation of political and economic views of twelve California public- and private-sector workers.[2] The present study, based on interviews with twenty-seven North Carolinians (plus spouses, partners, relatives, and others who joined our conversations), uses the same method of in-depth interviews as the studies described previously, although with a different end – to uncover the multiple conventional discourses used by my interviewees.[3]

[1] Two hundred participants has been the upper limit for previous interview studies of which I am aware. For examples of interview studies with large numbers of participants, see Bellah et al. (1985), Lamont (1992, 2000), Newman (1988, 1993), Ortner (2003), and Wolfe (1998). While these larger studies are suggestive, they still do not provide representative national samples, as Wolfe (1998) notes.

[2] Lane (1962), Hochschild (1981), and Reinarman (1987), respectively. Hochschild presents four reasons why in-depth interviews with a small sample are valuable: This method suggests larger truths, it can generate theories to be tested quantitatively, it explains findings from national surveys, and it generates different findings than national surveys (Hochschild 1981:23).

[3] Bellah et al. (1985), Gamson (1992), Lamont (2000), and Newton (2008) discuss related concepts.

From my interviews alone we have no way of knowing the wider prevalence of the views expressed. For that purpose I supplemented the interviews with two other sources of information. First, I paid attention to the conventional discourses about immigration and social programs I observed in editorials, blogs, political speeches, advocacy group Web sites, murals, and political cartoons. These sources yielded a few discourses that were not expressed by my North Carolina interviewees.

In addition, I examined national surveys from 2000 to 2010 whose wording mimicked that of vernacular conventional discourses. Most of the surveys cited were taken from the iPOLL database at the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut, and unless otherwise indicated are based on national adult samples.[4] I also searched for relevant questions in the 2008 General Social Survey (GSS) cumulative codebook from the National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago.[5] Survey results have to be used with caution because small wording changes can greatly influence responses. A conventional-discourse model of opinion formation explains these question-wording effects.

The interviews for this research were conducted in North Carolina. North Carolina is distinctive in some ways. It has the lowest unionization rate in the country,[6] and from 1990 to 2000 the rate of increase of Hispanics in North Carolina's population was the highest of any state in the country.[7] Since unions play a key role in mobilizing for economic protections, we might expect North Carolinians to be somewhat more opposed than residents of other states to social welfare programs. A large increase in Latino immigrants could lead to more nativist views than in other areas where immigrants are better established. Other researchers have noted nativist backlash in North Carolina,[8] and I found that immigration, especially Mexican immigration, was a hot topic for many of my interviewees.

[4] The full citation for all survey questions from iPOLL is iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut (http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html).

[5] National Opinion Research Center (2009). Responses given in the GSS codebook are raw numbers, not weighted to be representative of a national sample (Tom Smith, personal communication, June 23, 2011).

[6] Only 3% of the North Carolina workforce is unionized (Welch 2008).

[7] See Stuart (2004). That source refers to the growth between 1990 and 2002. The same claim has been made for the growth from 1990 to 2000.

[8] See Holland et al. (2007), especially chapter 4. Michèle Lamont notes that more studies of attitudes about immigration in heartland states that are not the traditional homes of immigrants are needed (Lamont 2000:93). This study, along with the research in Holland et al. (2007), helps address that lacuna.

It is misleading to generalize about the whole state, however, because North Carolina is divided by regional and social differences. The North Carolina participants in this study were chosen in two sites that differ in their local economies, cultures, and typical voting patterns.[9] The first site was Alamance County. The largest town in Alamance County is Burlington (population approximately 47,600), long known for its textile and apparel mills. Beyond Burlington, Alamance County consists of small towns. This small town life was appreciated by some of my interviewees for its warmth but criticized by others as narrow-minded and intrusive. At one time Burlington Mills was the largest textile company in the world, but textile employment in North Carolina has been contracting since the 1970s.[10] In 2008, 54 percent of the vote in Alamance County went to the Republican presidential candidate, John McCain.[11]

The second site was Wake County, in particular the wealthy suburban communities of Apex and Cary, as well as neighboring parts of the capital city, Raleigh. Cary has one of the highest household incomes in the state. Cary and Apex are bedroom communities for Research Triangle Park, home to high-tech businesses such as IBM, GlaxoSmithKline, Cisco Systems, and Sony Ericsson. Raleigh and the surrounding suburbs consistently receive national accolades (#1 Best Place for Business and Careers, *Forbes* 2007; #3 City for African Americans to Live, *Black Enterprise Magazine* 2007; #6 Brainiest Mid-sized Metro, *Bizjournal* 2006; #4 Best City for Singles, *Forbes* 2005; #1 City with the Happiest Workers, *Hudson Employment Index* 2004; and on and on). Given the job opportunities and relatively low cost of living, Wake is one of the fastest growing counties in the country.[12] In 2008, 57 percent of the votes in Wake County went to the Democratic candidate, Barack Obama.[13]

To recruit as diverse a group of interviewees as possible in these two areas, I conducted a random sample phone survey on the topics of my study. At the end of the phone survey, interviewees were invited to take

[9] See Luebke's distinction between "traditionalist ideology … rooted in the Baptist-based culture of North Carolina's small towns and rural areas" and "Modernizer ideology [which] is more secular than traditionalism, and it is rooted in the major cities of the North Carolina Piedmont" (Luebke 1998:20, 23).

[10] Beatty (1999) and Stuart (2005).

[11] See the election results at the North Carolina State Board of Elections Web site, http://results.enr.clarityelections.com/NC/7937/21334/en/select-county.html.

[12] See http://www.wakegov.com for accolades and information on population growth.

[13] http://results.enr.clarityelections.com/NC/7937/21334/en/select-county.html. The vote in the state as a whole was almost exactly divided between Obama (49.7%) and McCain (49.4%).

part in a longer interview on the same topics. If they were interested, we set a date and I sent a follow-up letter explaining my research, which was about their ideas regarding "what is a good community and society."

The interviews were conducted at their homes, at their workplaces, or in a restaurant or coffee shop. In most cases we met for two leisurely interviews in the spring and summer of 2000. The first interview covered their general ideas regarding what is a good society, then honed in on issues regarding the distribution of wealth and social welfare programs, immigration, and some related topics. The second interview was devoted to their life history. Each conversation was about an hour and a half long and was tape recorded with the interviewee's permission. Additional interviews were conducted with key actors for insight into the local political culture.

In 2000 the United States was at peace and the economy seemed strong. But the next several years were eventful: the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon in 2001, war in Afghanistan and Iraq, and a downturn in the economy, as well as increasing political rhetoric about immigration. As more years passed, memories faded of the mid-1990s national debates about the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, which had dominated all discussion of government social welfare programs for many years until AFDC was replaced with time-limited assistance. At that time means-tested benefits for immigrants were curtailed. In 2005 I reinterviewed as many of my original participants as possible (all but four of the original group) to see whether their views had changed.[14] The 2005 interview included the same survey that was administered in 2000. The follow-up interviews allowed me to learn about their lives in the last five years, probe again for their views about social assistance and immigration, and analyze the effects of changes in the speakers' identities, experiences, and opinion communities. (See Appendix B for data collection methods and interview guides.)

Twelve interviewees (six women and six men) were from Alamance County; fourteen (seven women and seven men) were from Wake County. In 2005 I added an interviewee from Durham County, which lies between the other two sites, because she contributed discourses I had not heard from my other participants.

Six interviewees identify as black/African American, twenty as white/European American, and one as mixed. The only other ethnic minority

[14] One was deceased, two moved and could not be located, and one, a busy new mother, declined.

background was partial, distant American Indian ancestry for two white interviewees and one black interviewee. None of my interviewees was either an immigrant or the child of one. The closest anyone came to a personal experience of immigration was one man whose first wife was a second-generation Mexican American and two interviewees who had one or more immigrant grandparents. Among the whites, all but one either listed Northern European backgrounds (English, Scottish, and Irish for the most part) or did not know their family's ethnicity. I would have liked to include people of other ethnic backgrounds, but the phone survey turned up only a few potential interviewees, none of whom wanted to participate. For that reason, Hannah Pick's companion study of twenty Mexican Americans in Southern California and Chicago, described in Appendix C, is a valuable supplement to my research.

By design, the sample was socioeconomically diverse. The range was particularly vivid on my last two days of fieldwork in 2005. First I met with my poorest interviewee, a disabled laborer living in his sister and brother-in-law's trailer. The next day I interviewed my richest interviewee, a retired land developer, in his $3 million beach home. The median annual household income of my Alamance sample was in the $35,000–$50,000 bracket in 2000, and four interviewees had completed four years of college or more, whereas the median annual household income of my Wake sample was in the $75,000–$100,000 bracket in 2000 and eleven had completed four years of college or more. (For information about the interviewees, see Appendix A.)[15]

What my interviewees had in common is that they were generous with their time. Some of them had life stories so interesting I could have devoted a book to those narratives alone. I regret that I cannot tell more of their lives, but Chapter 3 presents a few of their stories in detail to explain the relation between people's life experiences and their discourses.

Because this book analyzes rhetoric, it is particularly important to explain my terminological choices. It is anthropological practice to use local terms if they help convey the viewpoint and voice of the group being studied. For that reason, I leaned toward the words my interviewees used, such as *American* rather than *U.S. American*, *black* and *white* rather than

[15] One participant had been raised in a Jewish household but was not practicing, and three of my interviewees had been raised in Catholic families, but only one still attended Mass. As is typical of North Carolina, the remaining participants had been raised in or adhered to a Protestant denomination or were nondenominational Christians. About half of them attended church regularly, with three describing themselves as born-again.

African American and *European American*, and *illegal immigrant* rather than *undocumented immigrant* or *unauthorized immigrant*. When I am representing my voice rather than that of my interviewees, then I may switch to the terms preferred in academic communities. It is telling that there is no good vernacular cover term in the United States for both universal and means-tested government programs, such as those that provide economic assistance for education, healthcare, food, housing, family allowances, unemployment or disability income, and retirement pensions. The closest counterparts are *government social programs* and *social safety net*. In many other countries these are referred to as *social security* programs, but in the United States that term is reserved for the federal old-age and disability pension program. *Antipoverty programs* are not popularly imagined as including the social insurance programs (e.g., Social Security and Medicare) available to all classes that prevent people from falling into poverty. For many years *welfare* was shorthand for the stigmatized Aid to Families with Dependent Children and General Assistance income supports for the very poor; some of the stigma remains and makes the scholarly terms *social welfare* and *welfare state* somewhat problematic.[16] *Economic assistance*, *economic security,* and *social protection* are possibilities but were not used here because they are not common terms at present.

Researchers should always attempt to present their findings without bias, but they are never neutral observers. Their identities, experiences, and opinion communities color what they choose to study and how they interpret their findings. As much as I would like to think of myself as an original thinker, my discourses – like those of my interviewees – are in some ways typical of my social background and generation. I suppose I am a recognizable academic type: a white baby boomer born in the early 1950s, raised in a middle-class New Jersey suburb, ethnically Jewish but not practicing, and generally progressive in my politics. What drives my research, in addition to theoretical questions about how people internalize cultural messages, is a desire to figure out the political possibilities for a better society, which for me would be one in which a decent standard of living is more available to all. I am frustrated by politicians who try to pander to public opinion without a good understanding of its complexity and by well-meaning but sometimes intolerant activists who write off the U.S. public as either massively selfish or stupid. I do not agree. My

[16] See the research in Part III for an explanation of why there is considerable public support for welfare state programs but not for the "welfare state."

interviewees are not noble, high-minded paragons, because none of us is. Nor are their favorite conventional discourses the same as mine. But among the disparate discourses they embrace, there are many that could be the basis of politically effective, humane policies. My hope is that this research will encourage listening to each other more.

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My students in U.S. Social and Immigration Discourses (fall 2006) worked with me to develop an early version of the list of conventional discourses presented here. I also appreciate the feedback of my students and my colleagues' students in American Political Discourses; Anthropology of Policy; Research Apprenticeship; Language and Power; Language, Culture, and Society; The History of Anthropological Theory; and Senior Seminar in Public Policy, who goaded me into greater clarity and encouraged me with their enthusiasm. Brendan Rowan created Figure 9.1 and helped with last-minute fact checking and photo scouting. One former Claremont Consortium student in particular, Hannah Pick, obtained her own funding to conduct a parallel study with Mexican Americans, wrote up her findings for this book, put up with my ever-evolving discourse coding system, and contributed her expertise in sociolinguistics. I am grateful for her dedication and insights.

Whatever skills I have as a writer I learned first from my mother, Lee Strauss, then from my daughter, Rachel Van Cleve. I was fortunate to be able to hire Rachel as the developmental editor for this book. She forced me to defend my assumptions, streamline and enliven my prose, and pay attention to my topic sentences. I could not have worked with anyone better. Both Rachel and her brother, Nathaniel, make me happy and proud.

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